

➔ **LAOS:**  
**A TEAM APPROACH ALIGNED TO THE LOCAL  
DECISION-MAKING STYLE**

**In a Nutshell**

Project implementation often suffers from poor collaboration between the main actors – the recipient organization, project staff and the donor. A team-based approach to project management, where different stakeholders collectively share responsibility, may heighten the chance for success by creating a forum for ongoing capacity development, collective monitoring and a matching of expectations, in accordance with locally perceived priorities.

Such an approach was tried in Laos as part of the Governance and Public Administration Reform Programme. It proved particularly useful in governance-related projects, where technical skills, often provided by external consultants, need to be balanced with in-house knowledge of political sensitivities, as well as local styles of building consensus and making decisions. It fostered an environment where honest dialogue can flourish, based on the principle of mutual learning and respect.

**The Story**

Technical cooperation traditionally involves three players: the donor organization (bilateral, multilateral or trilateral), the recipient organization (usually but not necessarily a government agency) and sources of technical assistance (short-term or long-term, national or expatriate consultants, who may be individuals, consultancy firms or executing agencies). While technical cooperation calls all upon three to work together to achieve common objectives, real collaboration is the exception rather than the rule. In the classic case, one finds the donor on one side, the government or recipient stakeholder on the other side, and the project advisor(s) caught in between, trying to manage expectations.

By contrast, the Laotian authorities and UNDP have made serious progress in instilling project management with national ownership. Recipient organizations select short-term consultants and resident advisors from a list of proposed candidates, while national project directors have overall responsibility for managing financial resources, and are held accountable for results and disbursements. But not all donors follow this approach, and government staff often criticize the fact that they are not sufficiently involved in the decision-making. In general, the classic division between the government, project staff and the donor has so far been maintained in Laos. It became even more formalized when a donor coordination agency was established and became a de facto buffer between the donor and the government/project.

Yet the need to improve collaboration between the different parties has been clear, so the Prime Minister's Office decided to experiment with a more team-based approach for the Governance and Public Administration Reform Project, designed to assist ongoing reforms, with indirect support for reaching socio-economic goals, transitioning to a market economy and achieving sustainable development. A small project management team was put together, composed of the national project director, his deputy and the national project manager; the resident project advisor for technical assistance; and the UNDP programme officer. Meetings took place once or twice a month, chaired by the national project director or, in his/her absence, the project manager. Minutes were made available to all interested parties, in order to increase transparency.

Project objectives and related outputs had been defined in a general way, leaving room for the team to adjust the pace of implementation to changing priorities and opportunities. The different participants collectively shared responsibility for decisions related to implementation. And rather than being an outsider responsible, on behalf of the donor, for controlling disbursements in line with approved work plans, the UNDP programme officer was considered a full member of the project management team.

All the parties involved welcomed this approach. In countries with a group-oriented management culture, such as Laos, a team is more in line with the local decision-making style. The project management group also created a forum for capacity development, where all parties learned from each other's experiences and skills, and provided a mechanism for ongoing and collective project monitoring by key partners. Having members work together on the basis of equality and mutual respect proved to be fundamental. Too often, projects falter not because they lack technical inputs, but because of too little cultural sensitivity and behavioural flexibility. There are numerous cases of highly qualified consultants, both from the North and the South, who fail because of attitude, despite their high level of competency.

Membership of a project management team can easily be extended to other stakeholders, such as co-funding donors, pilot groups, non-governmental organizations or even beneficiaries. However, the management team should remain small to allow for meaningful dialogue and efficient decision-making. To ensure national ownership, it is important that the majority of the team members are nationals.

## **Results and Critical Factors**

- A team-based approach to project management is particularly useful in governance-related programmes, balancing technical skills often provided by external consultants with national knowledge of political sensitivities and the often complex processes of building consensus and making decisions.
- A team helps the project march to local time, rather than to externally defined timetables, which are not always in sync with realities on the ground.

- Such an approach also allows all parties involved to strike an appropriate balance between short-term success (imposed by the donors or by the political agenda of the host country) and long-term, sustainable results.
- Technical assistants can concentrate on substance rather than devoting a large portion of their time to shuttling between the donor and recipient.
- Donor agencies need to have adequate staff to participate proactively in project management teams and stay close to project implementation.
- On the recipient side, a successful team requires a culture of information sharing and a commitment to transparency in all aspects of project management.

### **Further information**

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2000. *Support to Governance and Public Administration Reform (1997-2000) Lao People's Democratic Republic*. Report of the final evaluation. UNDP.

Reforming Technical Cooperation for Capacity Development. 2002. "Insights in 1000 Words" ([www.undp.org/capacity](http://www.undp.org/capacity)).

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